

Centuries of Peace

By ReadWorks



Given the regular outbreaks of religious and political violence in the Middle East, it's easy to think of Muslims, Jews, and Christians as natural antagonists. This wasn't always the case, however. For hundreds of years, Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived in peace on the Iberian Peninsula, in what is now Spain. They farmed side-by-side, governed together, and even shared their most important intellectual and religious texts. This collaboration led to the founding of the first modern universities in the West.

But this peaceful collaboration is not what many remember most about the Muslim empire in Spain. What's most commonly known about the Muslim empire in Spain is its savagely violent beginning and end. After watching for centuries as the Visigoth empire collapsed into corruption and civil war, Muslims in Northern Africa began planning a massive invasion of the Iberian Peninsula. Under General Tariq ibn Ziyad, an army sailed nine miles from Africa to the Rock of Gibraltar (derived from the Arabic "Tariq's Mountain") in 711. By 718, Muslims controlled all of today's Spain and Portugal and part of southern France. This territory was called al-Andalus. Almost 800 years later, the last Muslim leaders were expelled from Spain during a brutal 11-year military campaign that ended on January 2, 1492, when King Mohammad XII surrendered in Granada.

Between these violent bookends, however, thrived a rich and multicultural culture called the Convivencia, or coexistence. While there were occasional outbreaks of violence and repression by Muslim authorities directed against people of other faiths, Christians

and Jews were officially labeled “dhimmis,” or protected peoples under Islamic law. A small number of Jews and Christians rose to powerful positions in the government.

People from all three faiths also joined together to share ancient texts that had been preserved by their respective religious teachers. In Toledo and in the empire’s capital of Cordoba, monks and scholars gathered from across Europe and the Muslim world to translate and debate important texts. Perhaps the most important of these scholars was Averroes, who was known in Arabic as Ibn Rushd. Averroes, a judge and scholar, delivered the forgotten wisdom of Aristotle to the rest of the world. He helped rescue ancient Greek philosophy from oblivion, enabling the Muslim empire’s golden age to provide the intellectual backbone later used to build modern Western civilization.

Born in 1126 to a family of prominent civic leaders, Averroes was considered a polymath, becoming a master in Greek and Islamic philosophy, theology, mathematics, and science. He started translating Aristotle from Greek into Arabic after the ruler of the Iberian caliphate asked him to create a version of the text that was clearer and easier to understand than previous translations. Averroes went on to translate most of the known works by Aristotle plus *The Republic* by Plato and also published many short commentaries on each work.

His work came at an important time. By the 12th century, only a handful of Europeans could still read the works of Aristotle in their original Greek. Few copies of the original survived because they had been written on fragile papyrus, and most versions copied onto more durable and expensive parchment were owned by Islamic authorities. After circulating through the scholastic society of Cordoba, Aristotle’s works were copied and sent across Europe, sparking a resurgence of interest in his philosophy in the West that continues today.

While all this seems very remote, the reasons behind Averroes’s work are just as important today. His best-known original work, “The Incoherence of the Incoherence,” was a defense of the rational mind over religious belief as the root of wisdom and knowledge. Aimed at Islamic leaders who were trying to enact a stricter version of religious law across the empire, Averroes took a risky position, arguing that humans should be the ultimate deciders of law and justice, not God. Five hundred years before writers such as Thomas Hobbs navigated a similar path, Averroes’s positions have caused many to call him the “founding father of secular thought in Western Europe.” Many of his works were kept at the personal library of the local caliph, or emperor, who was estimated to have collected around 400,000 books, making it one of the largest libraries in the world at the time.

While Averroes argued for greater plurality of world views, the culture of the Iberian peninsula promoted religious equality—or at least some modicum of tolerance—on a day-to-day basis. Jews emigrated from the Middle East and Northern Africa to Toledo and other major cities on the Iberian peninsula, creating some of the most stable and prosperous Jewish communities in the world at the time. It was here that a Hebrew Renaissance flourished, resulting in some of the most important works of Hebrew poetry.

Perhaps the most surprising collaboration between religions during the al-Andalus empire happened inside the mosques, which were shared between Muslims and Christians. This was most apparent at the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba. Founded in the year 600 by the Visigoths as a Catholic church, it was divided by Muslim leaders into Muslim and Christian sections after the Muslim conquest. As more Muslims immigrated to Cordoba and their ranks overwhelmed the building, the emir (ruler of al-Andalus) purchased the other half from the Christians and allowed the Catholics to rebuild churches that had been destroyed during the invasion. Thus began a two-century construction project to enlarge the mosque, which came to include some of the tallest and most ornate indoor structures in all of medieval Europe. The mosque was rechristened as Cordoba's cathedral when Christians re-took the city in 1236. Three hundred years later, local church leaders proposed to destroy the huge mosque and build a church in its place. But the townspeople were so opposed to the plan they won a rare intercession from the Holy Roman Emperor, second in the Vatican hierarchy only to the Pope, who agreed the mosque should be saved. Today the entire sprawling complex is protected by the United Nations as a World Heritage Site.

Coexistence between Jews, Christians, and Muslims during Islamic control of Spain was not perfect. Jews and Christians were never fully equal to Muslims under Islamic law, and their treatment varied based on changing political and religious decisions of Muslim leaders. But the centuries of Muslim rule were characterized by greater tolerance than anything found at the time in Europe. And thanks to the relative tolerance of the Muslim al-Andalus empire, Western Society rediscovered some of the philosophy and art that would become its foundation.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. According to the passage, where did Muslims, Jews, and Christians live in peace together for hundreds of years?

- A Northern Africa
- B the Middle East
- C the United States
- D the Iberian Peninsula

2. Averroes translated most of the known works by Aristotle from Greek into Arabic. What effect did Averroes's translations have?

- A Aristotle's translated works circulated throughout Europe, sparking a resurgence of interest in Aristotle's philosophy.
- B Aristotle's translated works circulated throughout Europe, sparking widespread criticism of Aristotle's philosophy in the Muslim empire.
- C The Iberian caliphate asked Averroes to create versions of Greek texts that were clearer and easier to understand than previous translations.
- D Averroes formed a defense of the rational mind over religious belief as the root of wisdom and knowledge.

3. The Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba is a symbol of peaceful religious coexistence. What evidence from the passage best supports this conclusion?

- A The Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba included some of the tallest and most ornate indoor structures in all of medieval Europe.
- B The Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba was divided by Muslim leaders into Muslim and Christian sections after the Muslim conquest.
- C The Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba was founded in the year 600 by the Visigoths as a Catholic church.
- D The emir purchased the other half of the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba from the Christians and allowed the Catholics to rebuild churches that had been destroyed during the invasion.

4. The word "secular" is used to describe something that is not based on or connected to religion. Why is Averroes considered the "founding father of secular thought"?

- A He argued for the greater plurality of world views.
- B Many of his works were kept at the personal library of the local caliph, or emperor, who was estimated to have collected around 400,000 books.
- C He defended the rational mind over religious belief as the root of wisdom and knowledge.
- D He took a risky position during a time when Islamic leaders were trying to enact a stricter version of religious law across the empire.

5. What is this passage mainly about?

- A the treatment of people of different faiths during the Muslim empire in Spain
- B the culture of the al-Andalus empire in Spain
- C the life and work of Averroes
- D the resurgence of Greek philosophy during the Muslim empire in Spain

6. Read the following sentence: "Given the regular outbreaks of religious and political violence in the Middle East, it's easy to think of Muslims, Jews, and Christians as natural **antagonists**. This wasn't always the case, however. For hundreds of years, Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived in peace on the Iberian Peninsula, in what is now Spain."

As used in this passage, what does the word "**antagonist**" most nearly mean?

- A enemy
- B friend
- C supporter
- D neighbor

7. Choose the answer below that best completes the sentence.

The Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba eventually had sections for Muslims and Christians, _____ it was originally built as a Catholic Church.

- A thus
- B also
- C but
- D like

8. What is the Convivencia?

9. Describe an example of people from different religions on the Iberian Peninsula coexisting or collaborating peacefully.

10. How did Averroes support the peaceful collaboration between Muslims, Jews, and Christians during the Muslim empire in Spain? Use information from the passage to support your answer.

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 1380

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8. What is the Convivencia?

Suggested answer: The Convivencia is the rich and multicultural culture that existed during the Muslim empire in Spain (between its violent beginning and end).

9. Describe an example of people from different religions on the Iberian Peninsula coexisting or collaborating peacefully.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary. Students may note:

- Some Jews and Christians were able to hold government positions alongside the Muslims.
- People from the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faiths also joined together to share ancient texts that had been preserved by their respective religious teachers.
- The Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba was divided into Muslim and Christian sections for people of both faiths to worship.
- The emir allowed the Catholics to rebuild churches that had been destroyed during the invasion.

10. How did Averroes support the peaceful collaboration between Muslims, Jews, and Christians during the Muslim empire in Spain? Use information from the passage to support your answer.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary and should be supported by the passage. Students may explain that he argued for greater plurality of world views and defended the rational mind over religious belief as the root of wisdom and knowledge. This would allow people to unify over a shared belief in knowledge and not divide over religious differences. Furthermore, Averroes's translations made Aristotle's philosophy accessible throughout Europe, leading to a resurgence of interest in his philosophy. This coincided with and promoted the efforts of people from all three faiths to share ancient texts.